**MEASURED BY LOVE**
**December 20, 2009**

**JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR**
**FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**Psalm 95:1–7**
**Luke 2:1–7**
**1 John 4:7, 10**

"What can I give him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give him:
Give my heart."

Christina Rossetti
"In the Bleak Midwinter"

*Startle us, O God, with your truth.*
*Startle us, again, with love in the birth of a child.*
*And touch our hearts, again, with beauty*
*and holiness and kindness and truth*
*in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

"It is June of 2002, and a very unusual ceremony begins in a far-flung village in western Kenya." Those are the first words on the flyleaf of a wonderful new book that I am giving this year to my children and grandchildren. It is a beautifully illustrated book, and you can read it to a child in ten minutes: *14 Cows for America* by Carmen Agra Deedy.

Kimeli, a young Kenyan, is returning to his Maasai village in western Kenya from California, where he is studying molecular biology at Stanford. Now it is a cardinal rule of preaching that you should not use your sermons as a way to tell about your vacations, all the wonderful places you have seen. But I can't resist, and besides, it is Christmas Sunday and everyone is feeling generous. So here goes. I have been to a Maasai village in western Kenya: a large circle enclosed by mud huts in which Maasai families live. Maasai are tall, elegant, graceful; the men in bright red tunics; and from childhood Maasai boys practice jumping, straight up in the air, a form of tribal dancing. By the time they are young men, they can jump to astonishing heights, straight up—two, three feet, and more, a vertical jump that would be the envy of an NBA power forward. Of course one of the amusing and

humiliating things that happens to American tourists is when, during a Maasai dance, the villagers invite the tourists to have a try. It looks so easy, so graceful. The result, needless to say, is not pretty. The average vertical jump of an American tourist is about three inches.

The Maasai live as they have for centuries, peacefully, taking care of their beautiful children and caring for their cattle. When Kimeli returns to his village in June of 2002, wearing khaki pants, white T-shirt, and red Stanford University jacket, all of the village children run out to meet him. He touches each head, a warrior's traditional greeting.

> Maasai were once feared warriors. Now they live peaceably as nomadic cattle herders. They treat their cows as kindly as they do their children. They sing to them. They give them names. They shelter the young ones in their homes. Without the herd, the tribe might starve. To the Maasai, the cow is life.

There is a joyful reunion with his old friends; his mother is there. The entire tribe gathers under an acacia tree, in a tradition as old as the Maasai, to hear a story. Kimeli tells the story that has burned a hole in his heart.

> There is a terrible stillness as the tale unfolds. With growing disbelief, men, women, and children listen. Buildings so high they can touch the sky? Fires so hot they can melt iron? Smoke and dust so thick they can block out the sun? The story ends. More than three thousand souls are lost. A great silence falls over the Maasai. Kimeli waits. He knows his people. They are fierce when provoked, but easily moved to kindness when they hear of suffering or injustice. At last, an elder speaks. He is shaken, but above all else, he is sad. "What can we do for these poor people?" Nearby, a cow lows. Heads turn toward the herd. "To the Maasai," Kimeli says softly, "the cow is life."
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> Kimeli offers his cow. The elders nod; others do the same. The tribe sends word to the United States Embassy in Nairobi. A diplomat is dispatched by Land Rover; he is hot and tired. He expects a complaint from the village elders. Instead it is a ceremony: hundreds of Maasai in their brilliant red tunics; young warriors dance, leaping into the air; women sing songs. The people gather on a sacred knoll; the elders chant a blessing. The Maasai people of Kenya present . . . fourteen cows for America. "Because . . . there is no nation so powerful it cannot be wounded, nor a people so small they cannot offer mighty comfort." *(Condensed and paraphrased from the book).*

The sacred, healing cows are still in Kenya, in the care of a village elder. They have calved and the herd now numbers thirty-five. They continue to be a symbol of life and hope and love, "from the Maasai to their brothers and sisters in America."

Kimeli received a masters degree in molecular biology from Stanford and was awarded a Rotary International World Peace Fellowship for study in 2010.

“No people so mighty they cannot be wounded. . . . No people so small they cannot offer comfort and love.”

No people so wealthy they have no needs.

No people so small they cannot give a gift.

The best Christmas gifts I have ever received came from little ones—a pair of socks from a three-year-old who said, “Daddy, please don’t look under my bed and find the socks we bought for you. They’re a surprise”; the plaster handprints; the popsicle-stick pencil holder; the Christmas tree ornament with a tiny picture of a little one smiling.

We learn over the years that it is a happy thing to receive a gift of love, and we learn that it is even happier to give a gift of love.

From his Nazi prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote to his fiancé at Christmas:

> Dear Maria,
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> I think that we’re going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. . . . I used to be very fond of thinking up and giving presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious: the emptier our hands, the better we understand. . . . The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ’s home on earth. (*Love Letters from Cell 92*)

The story itself is so simple. A man and a woman, not yet married; she is pregnant. And during a journey to his birthplace to register in a census, her baby comes. The village is crowded. They end up in a stable, where she gives birth. There is a star, a sky full of light and singing, a messenger from God telling poor shepherds there is “a great joy for all people, a Savior has been born, who is Christ, the Messiah.” That is the story. The meaning of the story is Incarnation, God coming to be among us as one of us, God coming to redeem and save us.

The brightest and best of us have labored to understand and explain it. Humankind has always waited and longed for God to come. “O that you would tear apart the heavens and come down,” the prophet Isaiah wrote. A powerful God to break into history and set things right; a God to break into my life and fix it, heal my diseases, make me healthy and wealthy and successful; a God who will watch over my investments and provide daily

favors, help me find a parking place, sell my condo. The startling Christian conviction, however, is that God came not in that way, but in that helpless, vulnerable little child not to overwhelm the world with divine power and might, but to touch human hearts with love, to redeem the world through the lives of individuals who have been touched by that love, to redeem and save our souls not by delivering us from this sinful world, but to transform us into lovers, to save us by showing us how to love. To call us together to be God's people who together pour the love of God they have experienced in Christ back into the world, to create a mighty force for justice and peace and kindness and compassion in the world; a people who, because they know themselves loved by God, cannot help loving the world, who live out their lives loving.

We are *measured by love.* Krista Tippett, host of public radio's popular *Speaking of Faith,* in her book of that title recounts how as a bright political journalist stationed in Berlin in the 1980s, she was thoroughly caught up in the drama and intrigue of international politics and assumed that all the problems of the world had geopolitical solutions. But she found herself intrigued with friends in East Germany who somehow found a way to live lives of joy and meaning and happiness even in a repressive society, and she changed her mind. There is more to changing the world than politics.

She quit her job, enrolled in Yale Divinity School, and has been thinking and pondering very creatively ever since.

Part of her divinity school experience was a stint as a chaplain in the Alzheimer's and dementia ward of a local hospital. The patients she visited, she said, "would ask me my name but never remember it. They were not interested in my background and education, the places I'd seen or the titles I'd held, the credentials. They would only know whether I was kind, gentle, patient, a good listener."

She realized there was nothing tangible she could do for them or give them. "I could come and love them as they were, and this was my greatest gift to them. But they gave me far more."

"When all is said and done," Krista Tippett wrote, "none of us will be measured by how much we accomplished, but on how well we love."

We are *measured by love.* It is how churches are and will be measured, I believe. Not by the size of their membership or budget, the magnificence of the building, the beauty of the music—all of which are particular blessings for which we are grateful. A church, I believe, will not be measured by the orthodoxy of its theology or the purity of its people, determined tragically these days by whom it is excluding. A church will be measured by love—how much of God's love it pours back into the world.

Just last week I discovered a little project I had somehow missed, even though it is an elegant example of pouring God's love back into the world, not unlike the Maasai and the fourteen cows. Our kindergarten and first grade Sunday School class studied King David, David the shepherd boy this fall, and they created a puppet show of the Twenty-Third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd." And then they had a great idea: they wanted to buy a sheep. So they invited the rest of the Sunday School students to join them in making sheep Christmas tree ornaments to sell—for the grand price of 50 cents. They wanted to earn $120 to buy a real sheep from Heifer International. As of last week, they had $88 toward a live sheep. I have a sense they'll go over the top this week. *(They did. As of December 21, they will be able to buy four sheep.)*

*Measured by love.*

The late Langdon Gilkey, who taught at the University of Chicago Divinity School, was one of the most brilliant theologians of the twentieth century. He was important and influential but not always easy to understand. But the clearest and most important thing Gilkey ever wrote was these words: "Our individual selves become themselves and are fulfilled only if they are enabled to love. . . . To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more than being loved."

Gilkey knew what every parent discovers: "Thus it is the parent who is really blessed by the presence of the child, not the reverse, because of the incredible gift of another being one can hardly help but love" (*Message and Existence*, p. 203).

God's gift of the Christ child, God's gift of love in Jesus Christ, is for the purpose of saving your soul from meaninglessness, dryness, boredom, by calling love out of you.

The late Reuel Howe, who led an institute to help ministers be better at their jobs, used to say, "If someone asks me how to find God, I say, find someone to love and you will find God."

A first-century Christian writing to a letter to a small church wrote, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

Last September 11, on the anniversary of the attack, NPR did a special on a retired New York City firefighter, John Vigiano, who lost two sons on 9/11: John Jr., also a firefighter, and his younger brother Joe, a police officer. Both died in the World Trade Center. John was close to both of his sons, talked to each of them every day. He recalled how around 3:30 on September 10 he talked to John Jr. They ended the call by saying, "I love you."

The next morning Joe called him and told him the earliest details of the attacks. That call also ended with “I love you.”

John Vigiano told NPR, “We had the boys, John for thirty-six years, Joe for thirty-four. I don’t have any could’ves, should’ves, or would’ves. I wouldn’t change anything. It’s not many people that the last words they said to their son or daughter was ‘I love you.’” (NPR StoryCorps 11 September 2009).

That’s what happens at Christmas. God says, “I love you” to the world, to all the children, all the people, to you and me.

It is how God decided to save the world—by loving, by touching human hearts with the gift of love.

> What can I give him,
> Poor as I am?
> If I were a shepherd,
> I would bring a lamb;
> If I were a wise man,
> I would do my part;
> Yet what I can I give him:
> Give my heart.
> (Christina Rossetti, “In the Bleak Midwinter”)